



## Pick Your Path to Health

### Naturally Disease Free

Is there a perfect prescription for staying strong and disease free? Well, nothing's perfect, especially in these times of national disaster on top of our own personal stress. Experts in alternative medicine agree that creating a healthy lifestyle that shores up the body's natural defenses against disease is a great start. Fine tuning body, mind, and spirit with regular exercise, a nurturing environment, and foods that are the best Mother Nature has to offer will not only boost your immune system, it will keep your energy levels high and help you keep stress at bay.

Sounds too good and simple to be true? Well, it shouldn't. You can greatly reduce your chances of many of the diseases we fear most-cancer, heart disease, and diabetes-just by being careful about what you eat. What makes the natural approach best? Its holistic focus. Visiting your physician regularly is important, but in the end, every facet of your life contributes to your health -- your relationships, work style, and even your ability to handle anger. "It all begins with your lifestyle," advises Andrea Sullivan, a Ph.D. and naturopath who practices in Washington, D.C.

In our fast moving, stress-ridden world, most of us are likely to take a last-minute approach to prevention. You know the drill. You run yourself ragged all year long and hope to survive flu season by popping extra vitamin C for a week and steering clear of the guy in the next office who's coughing up a lung. Even worse, you start exercising and eating right *after* your doctor says your cholesterol is way up, even though you know heart disease runs in your family. Enough already!

The right way, the only way, to give your body the best possible chance to avoid illness is to make prevention a part of everyday life. Here, Sullivan, the author of *A Path to Healing: A Guide to Wellness for Mind, Body and Soul* (Doubleday) shares her naturopathic approach to healthy living:

**Eat like your ancestors.** "You've got to start with foods," Sullivan says. "The cells and organs of the body need to be nourished with foods that are low in toxins, sugar, fat, white flour, and are high in fiber. Think primitive, meaning un-refined, unadulterated, lightly cooked whole grains, fruits, and vegetables. Forget sugar and consider blackstrap molasses and naturally sweet yams and fruits."

"Rather than driving yourself crazy with diets and recipes," Sullivan suggests, "think of colors and textures. Richly colored and textured bread, for example, is probably going to have whole grains." When it comes to fruits and vegetables, which should be the mainstay of your meals, choose, "bright yellows, greens, and oranges. All of these foods are rich in carotenoids, which are good for the blood vessels and other nutrients that strengthen immunity," Sullivan says. Drink plenty of water—eight glasses a day, and, don't forget your nutrition basics: eat lots of vegetables, fruits, and grains, as well as calcium rich foods such as yogurt and low-fat cheese or milk.

**Move your body.** Walk, run, play softball, do yoga, climb stairs, whatever turns you on as long as you get your heart rate up for at least 30 to 60 minutes a day, three times a week, Sullivan recommends. And don't overdo it.

**Sleep like a baby.** Popular rumors to the contrary, no one can stay healthy on four hours of sleep a night. "The body needs eight hours a night to help cells regenerate," Sullivan says. Recent research from the National University of Singapore also reports that getting only three or four hours of sleep increases the amount of stress hormone in the body.

**Let herbs help.** To gently prod the body toward healing without drugs, when faced with a cold or virus, some women take herbs. Ask for help from an herbalist and discuss with your doctor, as natural medicines can interact with any other medications you may be taking.

**See your doctor.** Even the best natural health plan cannot take the place of an annual check up. Getting pap smears, mammograms, blood pressure and cholesterol readings is a must. There's also no natural alternative to annual flu vaccines or hepatitis B vaccines. Should you take them? Before doing that, Sullivan says to discuss your personal risk factors with your physician and then decide.

**Relax and let go.** Being black in America comes with its own dose of stress that can drive up blood pressure and contribute to other problems. So, find a way to relieve tension, Sullivan advises. Try meditation, prayer, or deep breathing exercises.

**Have a great time.** "Have fun. Laugh, enjoy loving relationships," Sullivan says. "Surround yourself with people who support you and love you and be gentle with yourself." It will lead you down a path to better health.

*Pick Your Path to Health is a national public health campaign sponsored by the Office on Women's Health within the U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services. For more information about the campaign or to subscribe to the listserv to receive tips on improving your health, call 1-800-994-WOMAN or TDD at 1-888-220-5446 or visit the National Women's Health Information Center at <http://www.4woman.gov>. This article was developed through a partnership between the Office on Women's Health and the Wellness Warriors Network*